

The Linacre Quarterly

Volume 35 | Number 2

Article 8

May 1968

Human Sexuality and the Celibate Members of the Family of God

N.J.J. Van Greunsvan

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq>

Recommended Citation

Van Greunsvan, N.J.J. (1968) "Human Sexuality and the Celibate Members of the Family of God," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 35 : No. 2 , Article 8.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol35/iss2/8>

Human Sexuality and the Celibate Members of the Family of God

Rev. N. J. J. Van Greunsven, M.A.

Ever since Vatican II, the question of celibacy, i.e. the single life specified by Canon Law for any man who wishes to be ordained a priest in the Western Roman Catholic Church, has become an open discussion, a frank debate, and every so often an honest controversy. "The problem", as many prefer now to call it, of clerical celibacy and the discussion of it in many quarters did not subside after Pope Paul's Encyclical Letter on Clerical Celibacy (June 24, 1967). Despite urgings to the contrary, the World Synod of Bishops which met in Rome during September, 1967, was reluctant to place the "celibacy issue" on the agenda. As far as the United States is concerned, neither did discussions subside after the statement on Clerical Celibacy was issued by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (November 16, 1967). The entire problem could be easily resolved, according to some, if celibacy was made optional or if this particular ecclesiastical discipline was repealed all together. These suggested solutions (maintaining this ecclesiastical discipline must also be viewed as an additional solution) and their respective rationales appear to be based on the assumption that everyone is fully and completely aware as to what the real problem is. If celibacy is viewed as "a problem", then the clinical principle that a treatment plan and a prognostic judgment are as good as the diagnosis of the problem, is also applicable here.

As a priest-sociologist and marriage counselor, this writer has yet to see or hear the problem of clerical celibacy discussed in conjunction with the equally heated debates around the

problem of family planning which directly concern married couples within the Roman Catholic Church. In the majority of the discussions on both issues, one finds it difficult not to get the impression that if "the Church" (by which is obviously meant "the persons in authority") would relax, broaden, or repeal her traditional teachings in both areas, "priests and marital lives could be lived more realistically and more humanly. By implication, it often is suggested that the problems of celibacy and family planning are uniquely Roman Catholic problems and that, conversely, a married clergy and an unqualified option as to the methods of family planning for married couples would almost automatically make for greater personal and marital fulfillment. It is often further suggested, and again by implication, that married members of the Protestant and Jewish clergy experience hardly any difficulty in integrating their ministry and married life; that Protestant and Jewish married couples lead a more satisfactory married life because they do not have to concern themselves with the moral dimensions of the various methods of family planning. Physicians, psychiatrists, and marriage counselors can attest to the fact that one of the most frequently occurring complaints, in the array of symptoms, is that of sexual maladjustment. They can also attest to the fact that this complaint cuts across denominational, occupational, and educational lines.

(Father Van Greunsven is the Director, Family Life Bureau and Marriage Counseling Service, Diocese of Lincoln, Nebraska.)

Marital and celibate living are expressions of human sexuality. The degree of comfort or discomfort with one's chosen state of life depends to considerable extent upon the degree of comfort or discomfort with one's own sexuality. Consequently informal and formal education in sexuality is needed not only for men and women who are contemplating marriage, but also for persons who have chosen the priestly, celibate life.

There is a growing awareness (1) that theological universality (Catholicity) must allow for sociological plurality; (2) that ethical or moral guidelines in the area of human sexuality must go beyond its physiological dimension; (3) that medical understanding of human sexuality must go beyond anatomical and physiological considerations. At the same time, this growing awareness on the part of both the clerical and medical professions also indicates an increasing convergence into the socio-psychological dimensions of human sexuality.

As to the first awareness, suffice it here to refer to an increasing role of National Conferences of Catholic Bishops (and, in addition, a greater number of Catholic State Conferences in the United States) in preference to "Rome-based" decisions and policies which, in the past, were to be implemented regardless of the countries and cultures of which the Catholic Church is an integral part. Similarly, clerical celibacy is an universal ecclesiastical discipline. But, if clerical celibacy is an expression of human sexuality (or to be more precise, masculinity and masculine identification), it also must be remembered that attitudes and values relating to human sexuality are largely culturally conditioned. Accordingly,

although we find priests from all types of cultures questioning clerical celibacy and proposing similar solutions, it would be an error in judgement to assume that they do so for the same reason. A further illustration is the fact that bishops in some Western European Countries "manage" the celibacy question differently than the American bishops. The difference in "management" has very little to do with different loyalties to Catholic teaching. Rather, the difference reflects the difference in cultural, socio-psychological backgrounds, atmosphere, and contexts. Were this not the case, then programs in education in sexuality for example would be identical the world over.

As to the Catholic moral guidelines relating to human sexual behavior, sociological and psychological insights are certainly contributing to a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of human sexuality and human love. The "traditional" moral guidelines were predicated upon the "sacredness of sex" (spiritual) but then proceeded to regulate the physical aspects of human sexuality almost exclusively.

Such publications as *Marriage, the Family, and Human Sexuality in Medical Education* (Bowman Gray School of Medicine, Winston-Salem, No. Car., 1966) and the symposium in book form *Marriage Counseling in Medical Practice* (Chapel Hill; University of North Carolina, 1966) have contributed to a deeper understanding of human sexuality and have gone beyond physical examinations and genital sexuality.

It can safely be stated that since sex is not something we have but rather something we are, education in sexuality is equally needed for both

the actual as well as the potential members of the Family of God who have or are about to choose celibacy (through Sacred Orders or the vow of Chastity) as their way of expressing their sexuality. Reasonably mature perception of the sexual self is a prerequisite to be able to adequately express it in either marital or celibate sexuality. Marital sexuality which is viewed as "anything goes once married" is as inadequate as viewing celibate sexuality simply as "not being married". There has been much discussion and some controversy about the screening process of candidates for the priesthood and the religious life. Similarly, the functions and structures of novitiates, minor and major seminaries are currently re-examined and re-evaluated. To keep these discussions in their proper perspective, they must be seen in the same light as the discussions dealing with preparation for marriage.

Couples, contemplating marriage, bring their attitudes, values, and experiences about their own sexuality to Pre-Cana programs. Similarly, young men and young women entering novitiates, minor and major seminaries bring their respective attitudes, values, and experiences of their own sexuality along with them. Ideally these institutions should be engaged in a continuing program of education in sexuality. These institutions are meant to develop rather than protect a vocation to the priesthood and the religious life. Since formal education in sexuality is an inter-disciplinary enterprise (involving theologians, physicians, and socio-psychologists), this same team approach must be available to novitiates, and minor and major

seminaries. As a matter of fact it would seem that the functions and structures of these institutions can no longer be exclusively determined by theological considerations.

The number of continuing, adult-education programs dealing with marriage and family living are increasing by leaps and bounds. The area of marital sexuality and of assisting parents in developing in their children healthy sexuality is not neglected. Similarly, there is an increasing need for continuing education for the celibate members of the Family of God. Pastoral Seminars for priests and Sister Formation programs are examples in point. It would seem that the area of human sexuality, and particularly of celibacy as an expression of human sexuality, deserves greater attention. Priests, nuns, and brothers suffer from the same Victorian "hang-up" in sexual matters as the married adult. A greater attention to continuing education in sexuality is not only imperative as far as the personal growth of priests, brothers, and nuns is concerned but also for pastoral reasons for priests and because many nuns and brothers are grade and high school teachers. Seminars and workshops, staffed by members of the pertinent professions and augmented by some excellent audio-visual aids, are realistic means toward a dynamic sexual understanding of self and others. Finally there is a need to develop materials (both written and audio-visual materials) dealing with celibacy specifically to complement the materials, presented to priests, nuns, and brothers, dealing with human sexuality in general and marital sexuality in particular.